



Church Anniversary

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 29, 2009

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Lection – Matthew 16:13-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 13) Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 14) And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (v. 15) He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 16) Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (v. 17) And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. (v. 18) And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. (v. 19) I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

For those of us who are not strangers to African American Christianity, the “Church Anniversary” is the “big day,” the premiere event of the calendar year. In some locales this event is linked with “Homecoming,” where members who have moved away and family and friends, join in celebrating this grand occasion. This is a time of re-turning, re-mem-bering, and re-inforcing the church’s identity, history, her *raison d’etre*, and her relationship to her Lord, Jesus Christ. Born out of struggle and well-acquainted with permanent adversity, her mere existence is sufficient cause for jubilation and celebration. Renowned scholars, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiva note: “The Black Church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community. Not only did [she] give birth to new institutions such as schools, banks, insurance companies, and low income housing, [she] also provided an academy and an arena for political activities, and [she] nurtured young talent for musical, dramatic and artistic

development.”¹ The Church Anniversary is, in many ways, the church’s best opportunity to celebrate her achievements, marshal her resources, remember her past and focus on her future. Other special days will come and go, but church anniversaries will survive as long as the Church exists.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 16:13-19

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

My context is Danville, Virginia, a small town near Richmond, Virginia. This area is surrounded by churches with proud histories of community building, civil rights activism and neighborhood revitalization. In my context, I take great pride in celebrating the anniversaries of these churches, including mine, because they represent the institutions about which Lincoln and Mamiya wrote. They represent inclusion for those who have been locked out. They represent family and respect for its importance and they represent the work of God carried out on earth not primarily by mega size churches, but by churches operated by small groups of faithful people who week in and week out attempt to give their reasonable service to God.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

If you’ve never heard a sermon preached on Matthew 16:13-19, you probably don’t attend church very often or are very young or new to the Christian Church. This is one of the all-time favorite and often used scriptures for Church Anniversaries. Because this passage is so well known by Church attendees, there is a great need to avoid superficial treatment of the text by raising questions, in preparation, that the listener might be prone to ask. Such questions might be: “Where is Caesarea Philippi? (CP);” “From where does it derive its name?;” and “What is historically significant about it?” In other words, “Why does the biblical writer include it in the text?” Answers: Caesarea Philippi is located in the northern region of Israel, approximately 150 miles north of Jerusalem. Peter was from this northern region and, possibly, was familiar with its history. CP was originally named, “Paneas” after the Greek god, “Pan” and was a center of pagan worship.² After Rome conquered it, Herod the Great had a statue of Caesar Augustus erected and placed in the city. In 4 BC, after the death of Herod the Great, his son Philip named the city after Tiberius Caesar and himself.³ The death of Herod coincides with the birth of Jesus Christ. If nothing else, the mention of CP reminds listeners that the mission, message, and ministry of Jesus was not confined to local and comfortable settings, but rather, expanded its influence, even into foreign, and sometimes hostile territory.

Other questions might be: “Who is the Son of Man?” and “What is the significance of this term today?” Answers: The term “Son of Man” pre-dates Christianity. It is believed to be of Semitic origin and sometimes refers to Jesus, to humanity in general, or to someone else, e.g., Ezekiel 37:3, “Son of man, can these bones live?” “Son of Man” is thought to be an apocalyptic title that takes on messianic significance within the Christian movement primarily due to Jewish eschatology (study of “last things”) during the time of its early conception.⁴ Apocalyptic themes have always been popular in the African American church community; consider early figures such as Nat Turner, who employed visions an apocalyptic focus to inspire slaves to participate in one of the most famous slave insurrections in history. For us today, the term “Son of Man,”

signifies Jesus upholding his identification with his humanity and fellowship with humankind. Whereas, the erecting of the statue was designed to elevate Caesar to god-status, the title, “Son of Man,” as used by Jesus de-emphasizes the “god-over-man” idea and re-emphasizes the notion that God is *with us* in Christ.

In addressing the church’s history, heritage, and familial characteristics, it is important to depict Jesus as one who relates to us, rather than being just one who is over us. Jesus is *kinsman-redeemer*,⁵ related to humankind by blood to act as the atonement for our sins.

In Simon Peter’s response (v. 17), “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” the discussion shifts away from “now” to focus on future purposes. It is not Peter’s own knowledge, but a revelation from God that addresses Jesus’ true purpose here on earth, and the connection to those who will carry forth his name and fulfill his mission. This notion of Peter receiving revelation is especially appealing to African American Christians, because our faith community still believes that God gives revelations. What we know and “where we got it from” are issues critical to our survival, future progress, and our liberation. Our ancestors relied on revelation from God, even as they learned to read the Bible. Here’s a good place for the interpreter (the preacher) to discuss how technology (use modern references to make the passage more understandable), e.g., text messaging, Facebook, MySpace, etc., can provide us information. However, more than ever, we still need revelation to make proper use of all of today’s information, wherever it comes from and however it comes to us.

In Jesus’ remark to Peter (v. 18), “And upon this rock...” scholars have debated over who or what Jesus is referring to at this point. Because the Greek term, “*petras*” (Peter) is defined as “little rock,” it is widely held that Jesus was not referring to Peter, but to Himself as the rock,⁶ or the foundation and “chief cornerstone” (Psalm 118) of the Church. Given the many things that churches have come to symbolize in our day, reminding listeners of some of the original definitions of words in this passage may prove helpful, especially a definition of the word Church.

“The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Here, the Church is reassured that no demonic force will overtake the Church. This reminder is always pertinent as in each generation forces (usually in the form of men) come along and attempt to take the reins of the Church in selfish directions, which often leads to scandal. For black folk, we have been besieged from within and often from without. Our churches have been bombed, burned, and bombarded with hate. We have also had those who came from our womb, who looked like us, not serve the Church well. But, in spite of all that could have prevailed against us, on this Sunday we affirm yet once again, that the Word of God is true and above all other realities. The Church rolls on. Sometimes she (the Church) is prophetic and causes the world to tremble and attempt to blast her again. Sometimes she is too isolated and has to be shaken out of her cocoon by Christ and events placed at her doorstep. Sometimes she is even accommodating and mirrors only the desires of the culture. But, in all of this, Christ stands with her and says, “You are my construction, remember that. Celebrate that. Show the world that” and “the gates of hell shall not prevail against you.”

In verse 19, Jesus tells Peter, “I will give you the keys...” The keys symbolize access to life in Christ and participation in the enterprise of kingdom advancement. Jesus uses the

legal/rabbinical terms, “binding and loosing,” to assign to the whole community the task of appropriately implementing his teachings. (cf. 18:18)⁷ Indeed, let the church continue to implement the teachings of Christ, in times of economic collapse, in times of cultural confusion and in times when the world needs to hear a word from Christ. Let the Church roll on!

Celebration

One of the greatest truths of the text is that, ultimately, the Church is built on Christ and not on anything or any created being. Thus, not even Satan can destroy it or thwart its progress. The mere existence of the black church in the 21st century is clear evidence that the church is here to stay. We will continue to aid the Church, celebrate it, and not hinder it.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The statue of Caesar Augustus being erected in Caesarea Philippi, temple shrines to pagan gods (rocks), flesh and blood, church structures, steeples, kings, Roman emperors, heaven, hades, binding and loosing, dusty roads, keys, gates, the look on Peter’s face when he tells Jesus that he is the Messiah/Christ;

Sounds: The confidence in Peter’s voice as he affirms Jesus as the Messiah, the sound of a structure being built on a rock; and

Textures: The contrast between weak/soft flesh and a hard and durable rock.

Additional Information for Preachers and Teachers

- Psalm 118:22 – *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone”* further supports the idea that the foundation (Christ) upon which the church is built is permanent and indestructible.
- C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya in [The Black Church in the African American Experience](#), describe four “Dialectical Models of the Black Church: Assimilation, Isolation, Compensatory, and the Ethnic Community-Prophetic” Models. These descriptions should give the interpreter greater insight on the inner dynamics of the black church and his or her own church.
- Henry Louis Gates, [The Signifying Monkey](#), read chapter 1 on Esu-Elegbara (The Interpreter-Mediator-Trickster). Gates lends tremendous insight into the interpretative process.
- Websites: Warren, Paula Stuart. “Churches Have Anniversaries Too!” 31 March 2006 [Family History Section/ancestry.com](#). Online location: <http://blogs.ancestry.com/circle/?p=35>. The author, Paula Stuart Warren, prefaces this blog with concerns that bloggers have about researching local church histories, such as: finding the original records, what kinds of information to look for, and identifying helpful websites.

Notes

1. Lincoln, C. Eric. and Lawrence H. Mamiya. The Black Church in the African American Experience. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990. p. 8
2. Blank, Wayne. "Caesarea Philippi." Daily Bible Study. Online location: <http://www.keyway.ca/htm2000/20000831.htm> accessed 15 January 2009
3. Ibid.
4. "Son of Man." Wikipedia. Online location: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_of_Man accessed 15 January 2009
5. Ibid.
6. "Confession of Peter." Wikipedia. Online location: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confession_of_Peter accessed 15 January 2009
7. Harrelson, Walter J., Ed. The New Interpreter's Study Bible, NRSV with the Apocrypha. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003. p. 1776